The eschatology of Increase and Cotton Mather.

The eschatology of Increase and Cotton Mather represents a pivotal moment in the development of American apocalyptic thought. While both father and son were ardent premillennialists (or "chiliasts") who believed in the literal return of Christ to establish a kingdom on earth, their views diverged significantly on the *timeline* and the *signs* precipitating that event—specifically regarding the restoration of Israel.

The following analysis details their respective theological frameworks, the evolution of their thought, and the distinct "City in the Air" concept developed by Cotton Mather in his final years.

Executive Summary: The Mather Shift

In the 17th century, Puritan New England largely held to a "historic premillennial" view (often called *chiliasm*), distinct from the later "dispensational premillennialism" of the 19th century. Increase Mather was the stalwart defender of the classical view: the Jews must be converted as a nation *before* Christ returns. Cotton Mather, however, radically broke from this tradition late in his life. In his *Triparadisus*, he argued that the Jewish conversion had already happened (a preterite view), thereby removing the final barrier to the Second Coming and rendering the apocalypse imminent.

1. Increase Mather: The Restoration of Israel

Increase Mather (1639–1723) is often credited with solidifying premillennialism in American theology. His eschatology was anchored in a rigorous, literal hermeneutic that rejected the allegorizing tendencies of earlier reformers who equated "Israel" solely with the Christian Church.

The "Bellwether" Sign: National Conversion of the Jews

In his seminal work, *The Mystery of Israel's Salvation* (1669), Increase argued that the most reliable sign of the end times was the literal, national conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity.[1] [2]

- **Literal vs. Spiritual:** He distinguished between "Spiritual Israel" (the Church) and "Natural Israel" (ethnic Jews). He contended that prophecies regarding Israel's restoration were not metaphors for Church growth but literal promises to the Jewish nation.[1]
- **The Timeline:** Increase believed this conversion would occur *before* the Second Coming. Thus, while he lived in expectation of the end, his eschatology contained a "safety brake"—the world could not end until this massive sociological miracle occurred.

- **The Millennium:** He foresaw a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth (the *Chiliad*), inaugurated by the resurrection of the "just" (the First Resurrection) and the destruction of the Antichrist (the Papacy).[3] [1]

The Descent of the New Jerusalem

In his later manuscript *New Jerusalem*, Increase described the millennial state not merely as a time of improved church conditions, but as a supernatural alteration of the cosmos. He argued that the "New Jerusalem" would literally descend from heaven to earth, serving as the capital of the millennial kingdom.[1]

2. Cotton Mather: The Apocalyptic Architect

Cotton Mather (1663–1728) initially followed his father's views but eventually developed a more complex, volatile, and imminent eschatology. His mature thought is codified in his massive, unpublished *Triparadisus* (1726/27).

The "Great Recantation": Abandoning the Jewish Sign

For most of his life, Cotton preached the standard view: pray for the conversion of the Jews so Christ can return. However, in the 1720s, he underwent a "dazzling" theological shift.

- **The Shift:** In *Triparadisus*, he explicitly "recanted" his former position. He adopted a *preterite* interpretation of Romans 11, arguing that the prophecies of Jewish conversion were sufficiently fulfilled in the Apostolic age or were not a prerequisite for the Parousia.[4] [5]
- **The Implication:** By removing the requirement for a future Jewish conversion, Cotton removed the "safety brake." The Second Coming could now happen at any moment, without any further sociological or political warning. This shifted his mood from anticipatory to urgent.[4]

The "City in the Air" and the Conflagration

Cotton Mather developed a vivid, almost science-fiction-like mechanism for the Rapture and the Millennial transition, distinct from modern "Left Behind" theology.

- **The Conflagration:** He believed the present earth would be purified by a literal, cataclysmic fire (*Conflagration*). This fire would burn the surface of the earth, destroying the wicked and purging the "base matter" of the fallen world.[6]
- **The Aerial City:** While the earth burned, the resurrected saints and the living "changed" saints would be caught up into the air. They would inhabit a **"City in the Air"** (the New Jerusalem hovering above the earth) or a "place of safety" in the aerial heavens.[7] [8]
- **The New Earth:** After the fire subsided and the earth was "transmuted" into a paradisiacal state, the saints would descend from their aerial safety to inhabit the **New Earth** for the millennial reign.[9] [6]

The Threefold Paradise

The title *Triparadisus* refers to Cotton's categorization of the believer's reward, which he saw as a progression through three distinct "heavens" or "paradises":[6] [9]

1. **The Paradise of Spirits:** The intermediate state where the soul goes immediately after death (awaiting resurrection).
2. **The Paradise of the New Earth:** The literal, physical millennial kingdom after the Conflagration/Resurrection.
3. **The Paradise of the Highest Heavens:** The eternal state following the final judgment and the end of the millennium.

3. Comparison: Father vs. Son

Feature	Increase Mather	Cotton Mather (Mature View)
Primary Work	*The Mystery of Israel's Salvation*	*Triparadisus*
Jewish Conversion	**Future & National:** A literal event that *must* precede the End.	**Preterite/Past:** Already fulfilled or not a prerequisite.
Timing of End	**Delayed:** Pending the conversion of the Jews.	**Imminent:** Could happen at any moment; no barriers remain.
The Rapture	Part of the First Resurrection; focus on the "gathering."	Explicit **"City in the Air"** concept: saints hover while earth burns.
Hermeneutic	Literal/Typological (Israel = Ethnic Jews).	Literal/Scientific (Conflagration as chemical transmutation).
View of America	A refuge; a place to wait for the end.	*Theopolis Americana*: A "street of gold" (market of integrity); later, a place ripe for judgment.

4. Why This Matters

The shift from Increase to Cotton Mather marks the transition from **Puritan Hope** to **Evangelical Anxiety**.
Increase Mather's view allowed for a "period of preparation"—Christians had work to do (evangelizing Jews) before the end. Cotton Mather's mature view collapsed that timeline. By arguing that the signs were already fulfilled, he introduced a radical immediacy to American eschatology that influenced later revivalists.

Cotton's "City in the Air" also serves as a fascinating precursor to the 19th-century "Pre-Tribulation Rapture" theory (popularized by Darby), though Cotton's version was **Post-Tribulation/Pre-Conflagration**. He believed the Church would go through the tribulation but be lifted just before the physical destruction of the planet's surface.

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